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ABSTRACT

Attitudes and beliefs about the admissions process, especially the role of standardized testing in admissions, were examined for students who took a standardized admissions test more than once. Their attitudes were compared with those of students who did not repeat the test. About 200 preveterinary students who had taken the Veterinary Aptitude Test (VAT) either once or twice, matched by initial score, responded to a mailed survey--the Veterinary Admissions Questionnaire (VAQ)--about their perceptions of the admissions process. The repeater group returned 114 out of 201 surveys, and the comparison group returned 91 out of 151 surveys. Repeaters and non-repeaters were similar in most demographic characteristics and in beliefs about their probability of admission and the role of standardized tests. However, repeaters appeared more concerned about the test and were more likely to take the VAT earlier in their undergraduate studies, possibly as part of a deliberate strategy to take the test for practice. The VAQ is presented. (Author/SLD)

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WHY DO STUDENTS REPEAT ADMISSIONS TESTS?

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Abstract

About 200 pre-veterinary students who had taken the Veterinary Aptitude Test either once or twice, matched by initial score, responded to a mailed survey about their perceptions of the admissions process. Repeaters and non-repeaters were similar in most demographic characteristics and in beliefs about their probability of admission and the role of standardized tests. Repeaters, however, appeared more concerned about the test and were more likely to take the VAT earlier in their undergraduate studies, possibly as part of a deliberate strategy to take the test for practice.

Paper presented at the 1988 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans. Further information may be obtained from the author at The Psychological Corporation, 555 Academic Court, San Antonio, Texas 78204.

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WHY DO STUDENTS REPEAT ADMISSIONS TESTS?

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OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes and beliefs about the admission process, especially the role of standardized testing, of students who take a standardized admission test more than once and to compare their perceptions with those of similar students who did not repeat the test.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES

The 1974 Standards for Educational and Psychological Tests suggest (in section J7, Alternative Explanations) that an examinee should have more than one "opportunity to qualify for a favorable decision" and that "in general ...retesting should be provided without major obstacles." The Standards add that "over a period of time, individuals should have a chance for reevaluation on the basis of new learning or new experience."

In the 1985 Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, however, the section on alternate explanations (6.11) does not mention retesting. In fact, the issue of retesting appears only indirectly, in connection with test-taking strategies (3.11) and practice or coaching effects (3.14).

The phenomenon of repeating admission tests has not received attention in proportion to the numbers of examinees affected. The percentage of test-takers who are repeating an admission test can range as high as 30% in a year and has reached 50% on a given date (Jones & Beran, 1980). Repeating is most common on the Test of English as a Foreign Language and on tests for entry into prestigious professional study such as law, medicine, and dentistry, for which students are likely to apply a second or third year. Even the SAT and ACT report repeater rates around 10%.

The effect of repeating on the test score itself has frequently been examined. A recent study (Jones, 1986) of tests for high-level study (GRE, MCAT, and VAT) found that a third of repeaters had significant gains of more than half a standard deviation; another third stayed the same or had moderate gains of half a standard deviation or less; and the remaining third actually earned lower scores on the second test. The presence of large percentages of repeaters may affect norming and equating of test forms.

Technical manuals and other literature on particular tests may report information about the demographic characteristics of repeaters and the effect of repeating on test scores (e.g. Jones & Beran, 1980; Kingston & Turner, 1984; Jones, 1986). Admission officers and other test users, however, have no uniform way of translating research into policy and practice. Colleges may choose to use the most recent score, because it is believed to reflect current ability; the highest score, because it indicates potential; or the average score, to reduce overreliance on a single measurement. The basis for their decision may include subtle or explicit assumptions about the reasons that students repeat an admission test, assumptions which may not match the true state of affairs.

METHODOLOGY

This study was intended to gather information directly from examinees about their reasons for repeating an admissions test and their beliefs about its role in the selection process. The testing program selected for this study was the Veterinary Aptitude Test, or VAT. The VAT is a standardized multiple-choice test measuring biology, chemistry, quantitative reasoning, and two types of reading comprehension. It was chosen because 1) competition for admission to veterinary school is intense, even greater than for medical school, and students have high motivation to do well on the test; 2) the test is designed for entry into a single field, thus reducing the heterogeneity of the subject pool in academic preparation and educational goals; and 3) a high percentage (up to a third) of VAT examinees are repeaters. The VAT is therefore an extreme case study of the phenomenon of repeating.

A sample of 200 repeater students was randomly selected from those taking the VAT for the second time in November 1987 whose first test was no earlier than October 1986. (Those testing for a third or fourth time were excluded.) A comparison sample of 150 was also chosen, consisting of students who had taken the VAT for the first time in October 1987 and had not since repeated it. The comparison examinees were matched to the repeaters on the basis of the repeaters' initial scores, with sex and state or region matched where possible. (State of residence is highly salient to veterinary school applicants because many veterinary schools will accept only applicants from certain states. The influence of individual school requirements can thus be reduced by controlling for residence.) The comparison sample was not a true control group because it was not chosen randomly from the population of first-time examinees. The reason for selecting the comparison group on the basis of initial score was to control for the effect of the score itself on the examinee, since (logically enough) students who receive lower scores are more likely to repeat. The focus of this study was on the subjective factors involved in repeating.

The repeaters and comparison group received slightly different questionnaires mailed to their address as of the date of testing. The questionnaires were mailed after the students had received their latest score reports, but before they knew whether or not they had been admitted to veterinary school. The students were assured that confidentiality would be maintained.

A combined version of the questionnaire appears at the end of this report. It asked objective and open-ended questions about several issues: judgment of probability of acceptance to veterinary school, beliefs about the role of testing in admissions, preparation for the VAT, satisfaction with the VAT score, etc. The questionnaire responses were combined with information from the VAT examinee files. The testing program files contain detailed information on each applicant, including educational level, age, sex, ethnicity, subtest scores, and total score.

RESULTS

The response rate to the survey was acceptable, with a total of 205 (58%) of 352 returning their surveys. The repeater response was 114 of 201 (57%), and the comparison group returned 91 of 151 (60%). The respondents and nonrespondents in the comparison group were quite similar in demographic characteristics and total test scores, except that females were more likely to

respond. The repeaters who responded, however, were somewhat younger, in an earlier year of school, and scored higher (141 vs. 134) than the nonresponding repeaters; they also included fewer Blacks and males.

The repeaters and comparison group members who responded had identical total test scores and were similar in sex and race, but the repeaters were much more likely to have junior class standing or below (52% vs. 35%). Both groups were similar to the national pool of veterinary applicants (Sawyer, 1987) in race and gender, but were younger and in an earlier year of school. (Because veterinary schools may accept test scores up to six years old, many applicants have not taken an admission test the year they apply or reapply.)

Because the repeaters, even though they had fewer years of education, were more likely to be applying for the second time, a subgroup of the repeaters was identified whose inital test did not fall within last year's application cycle. The 68 members of this "first-cycle" group resembled the total group of repeaters in race, age and educational level, but had test scores slightly higher (146 vs. 141) than either the repeaters or comparison group. This "first-cycle" group is a better match to the comparison group in terms of its experience with the admission process.

The three groups being studied (comparison, repeater, and first-cycle repeater subgroup) were much more alike than different in their survey responses. Detailed statistics appear on the attached questionnaire; this discussion will summarize and highlight the main findings.

The three groups all have a strong commitment to attending veterinary school: at least 90% will definitely attend if accepted. The control group, however, is much more likely to apply to more than one school (twice as likely as the first-cycle repeaters). The three groups give ten possible sources of help in the admission process about the same rank and weight, but the comparison group places more weight on preprofessional advisors and less on practicing vets. Practicing vets are ranked number one by all groups, and family/friends ranks second or third; these resources are difficult for schools or test publishers to keep informed about the admissions process.

In rating their own chances of acceptance to veterinary school, respondents from all groups think their chances are at least average (3.1 on a 5 point scale). They rank the average applicant's chance of acceptance somewhat lower (2.7) although still in the average range. In reality, applicants to veterinary school now have about a 50-50 chance of acceptance overall (Sawyer, 1987), but since these students have lower test scores than average, they may be rather optimistic about their own chances.

The questionnaire asked students to assign percentage weights to nine factors in the admission process. Again, all three groups were remarkably consistent, giving about 35% combined to GPA and courses taken, 10% to standardized tests, and 50% to less objective factors such as animal experience, interview, and recommendations. In an open-ended question about factors expected to help or hinder admission, GPA and test scores were seen as problems and animal experience as a plus.

The questions dealing with the test-taking process itself bring out the main differences between the repeaters and the comparison group. The repeaters made their decision to take the VAT for the first time earlier and were more

likely to prepare for it. The overwhelming choices for preparation among all groups were studying commercial test guides and reviewing previous coursework. Although the median time spent preparing was the same for all groups (around 8 hours), the mean time was higher for repeaters (21 vs. 15); some repeaters reported spending more than 100 hours preparing for the first test.

On a 5-point scale, all groups were moderately dissatisfied with their initial score, but the repeaters were more so (rating of 4.0 vs. 3.7, and 72% vs. 58% choosing the "worse than expected" options.) Since the groups were in fact below average, with median percentile scores of 35, their perceptions seemed realistic.

The decision whether or not to repeat the VAT was most commonly made after receiving the score on the initial test, although the first-cycle repeaters had often made the decision even before taking the first test (37% vs. 21%). Almost a fifth of all groups made the decision after taking the first test but before receiving the score, implying that the experience of taking the test itself had an impact on their self-assessment.

On a list of eight reasons for repeating the test, all groups overwhelmingly chose dissatisfaction with the first score as the most important reason. Taking the first test for practice was the second choice among repeaters, but dropped to fourth for the comparison group. The effect of anxiety and of taking additional coursework completed the top four choices of all groups. The comparison group ranked the advice of an admissions officer and the effect of illness more highly than did the repeaters. Illness, a commonly cited justification for repeating, was ranked high by less than 15% of this sample.

The repeaters were slightly more likely to prepare for the second test and to spend more time preparing. Again, reviewing coursework and studying a commercial test guide were the preferred methods; fewer than 5% enrolled in a workshop. The repeaters' total test score averaged over half a standard deviation higher than their first score (161 vs. 141), and the median percentile rose to 50. (This increase is similar to that found in Jones, 1986.) It was not surprising, then, that the repeaters' satisfaction with their score rose from 4.0 on the first test to 3.0 on the second (3.0=about as expected).

DISCUSSION

Overall, repeaters and non-repeaters in this study held similar views about their commitment to professional study, the weight given to various factors in the admission process, the people most helpful during the admission process, and the students' chance of acceptance. The main difference between the groups seemed to be one of attitude rather than knowledge. Repeaters planned to take their first test earlier, prepared more for it, were more likely to take it for practice, and were more concerned about the results. They also began the application process earlier in undergraduate school and applied to fewer schools. In short, the repeaters had a heavier personal investment in the admissions process.

Because veterinary school admissions officers ranked high as an admissions resource, they could help reduce the repeaters' tendency to "jump the gun" by making their policies on repeated testing explicit. More drastically, the schools could reduce the number of acceptable test dates for a given admissions cycle or even set a single date. The reasoning is that standardized tests are used as a yardstick for comparing students from different schools, so perhaps the testing procedure should be as uniform as possible.

Pre-professional advisors and books could give more realistic and detailed advice about the circumstances that warrant repeating a test. Eventually this information would reach parents, friends, practicing veterinarians, and other influential factors in the admission process. Finally, test publishers can educate examinees, advisors, and admissions officers about the impact of repeating on test scores and the proper interpretation of test results.

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

The results of this and similar research may suggest guidelines for examinees, preprofessional advisors, admission officers, and test developers. Unnecessary repeating exacts considerable financial and time commitments from students and increases the workload of admission officers and testing programs. On the other hand, students who would benefit from retesting should be able to receive trustworthy advice from counselors and testing program materials. The current lack of uniformity in institutional policies regarding retesting adds to the general confusion. Better understanding of the student attitudes and beliefs that lead to repeating admission tests will help to improve the admission process for all concerned.

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VETERINARY ADMISSIONS QUESTIONNAIRE SUMMARY

(This version combines and slightly modifies the two questionnaires actually used in the study. Numbers represent all repeaters, first-cycle repeaters, and comparison group members, in that order. All numbers are percentages unless otherwise indicated.)

1. Application History (Check the appropriate response.)
   - 01-02-12 I have never applied to veterinary school. (Go to #4.)
   - 63-94-81 I applied this year (1987-88) for the first time.
   - 33-03-06 I applied this year for the second time.
   - 03-02-00 I applied this year for the third time.
   - 01-00-01 Other (describe _____)

2. If you are accepted by at least one school this year, what are your plans?
   - 94-94-90 I will definitely attend.
   - 04-03-09 I will attend if _____
   - 02-01-01 I will not attend because _____

3. How many schools of veterinary medicine have you applied to this year?
   - 60-72-44 Only one
   - 14-12-15 Two
   - 25-15-41 Three or more

4. Who or what has assisted you with the admissions process? Please rank your answers in order (1 = most helpful). Leave blank any that do not apply.

ranking	
5-6-4	Pre-professional advisor
8-8-8	Other undergraduate faculty
2-3-3	Veterinary school admissions office
9-9-9	Other veterinary school faculty
6-5-5	Classmates
7-7-7	Veterinary students
1-1-1	Practicing veterinarians
4-4-6	Books and publications
3-2-2	Parents and friends
10-10-10	Other (describe _____)

5. What do you think is the probability of being accepted by at least one veterinary school?

Yourself		Average Applicant
14-13-10	less than 20%	03-02-06
13-09-18	20% to 40%	31-32-34
33-34-36	40% to 60%	53-54-53
24-22-24	60% to 80%	13-12-07
16-22-12	over 80%	00-00-00

6. In general, how much weight do you think each factor listed actually carries in the admissions process? (Give your answers in percentages; your answers should total 100%.)

median percentage	
25-25-25	Overall grade-point average
10-10-10	Courses taken
10-10-10	Standardized test scores
10-10-10	Personal recommendations
05-05-05	Essay
05-05-07	Interpersonal skills and leadership
14-10-13	Animal experience
05-05-05	Other extracurricular activities
10-15-10	Other (describe _____)

7. List any factors that you think will especially help or hinder your admission to veterinary school.

8. When did you take the VAT for the first time? (month/year 10/87)mode

9. When did you make the decision to take the VAT on that date?
   - 63-66-50 Several months earlier
   - 34-31-47 One to two months earlier
   - 04-03-03 Just before the test (I took it standby)

10. How did you prepare for the VAT? (Check all that apply.)

    - 31-26-38 Didn't do anything special
    - 54-57-41 Reviewed coursework
    - 02-01-03 Took additional coursework
    - 54-63-46 Studied a commercial test guide
    - 00-00-00 Enrolled in a school-sponsored workshop
    - 02-00-00 Enrolled in a commercial test workshop
    - 02-03-07 Other (describe _____)

11. How many hours did you spend preparing for the VAT? 08-08-08 median
    21-21-15 mean

12. How satisfied were you with your first VAT score?
    - 01-02-04 I did much better than expected
    - 08-10-08 I did somewhat better than expected
    - 20-19-30 I did about the same as expected
    - 34-38-26 I did somewhat worse than expected
    - 38-40-32 I did much worse than expected

13C. Do you plan to retake the VAT?

22 Probably (month/year _____)
17 Undecided
30 Probably not
31 (No response)

13R. When did you take the VAT for the second time? (month/year 11/87)

14. When did you make the decision whether or not to retake the VAT?

24-37-21 Before taking it the first time
19-21-18 After the first test but before receiving my score
49-34-49 Shortly after receiving my score
04-04-00 Just before the test (I took it standby)
04-04-12 (No response)

15. Why did/would you decide to retake the VAT? Please rank your answers in order (1 = highest). Leave blank any that do not apply.

ranking

7-8-6 My first test was affected by illness or fatigue.
4-3-2 My first test was affected by anxiety.
5-5-7 A faculty member advised me to.
6-6-5 An admissions officer advised me to.
3-4-3 I had completed additional coursework.
2-2-4 I took the first test mainly for practice.
1-1-1 My first score wasn't as high as I wanted.
8-7-8 Other (describe _____)

16. How did/would you prepare for retaking the VAT? (Check all that apply.)

18-19-03 Did not do anything special
61-59-74 Reviewed coursework
20-12-17 Took additional coursework
58-60-71 Studied a commercial test guide
02-01-16 Enrolled in a school-sponsored workshop
04-03-18 Enrolled in a commercial test workshop
04-04-00 Other (describe _____)

17R. How many hours did you spend preparing for this VAT? 14-10 median
23-18 mean

18R. How satisfied were you with your second VAT score?

16-16 I did much better than expected
26-28 I did somewhat better than expected
18-18 I did about the same as expected
22-18 I did somewhat worse than expected
18-21 I did much worse than expected

C=Question asked comparison group only R=Repeater only